

[Vaudeville in Chicago]

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VAUDEVILLE IN CHICAGO.

Time - 1919 PLACE "The Corner."

"Meet me at Dearborn and Randolph." The Midwest edition of New York's famed Times Square. For Chicago also had its theatrical business district, a small area which housed the offices of the booking agents, vaudeville circuit heads, managers and producers, theatrical publications, music publishers, and other swivel-chair functionaries who were never seen by the audience during these gala days of variety. For in 1919 vaudeville was truly an important industry in Chicago.

Morning 'til night (say 10 a. m. to 5 p. m.) the sidewalks on the northeast and northwest corners of N. Dearborn and W. Randolph Sts. were crowded with vaudeville performers. There were acrobats, aerialists, singers, dancers, ventriloquists, jugglers, animal men, dramatic sketch artists, piano teams, dialect comedians in all classes, wire walkers, trick

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cyclists, sister teams, trios and quartettes, pantomimists, trick cartoonists, novelty musical acts, monologists, soubrettes and prima donnas, mimos and entertainers in all the infinite variety which was Vaudeville.

In Times Square they loitered on the curb in front of the Palace Theatre Bldg.; in the Loop they stood in front of the Woods Theatre Bldg. In New York they assembled in groups before the new Annex Bldg., in Chicago they congested the sidewalks in front of the Delaware Bldg. In 2 both places the acts were essentially the same in character and content, however different were the names and billing matter they gave to the office boys in the booking offices. The seething pot of vaudeville was constantly boiling. To-day the Juggling Jarrows might be standing in front of the Palace Theatre Bldg., in New York; while the Balancing Belmonts are in front of the Woods Theatre Bldg., in Chicago. Five or six months hence the Juggling Jarrows will be in Chicago, while the Balancing Belmonts are in New York. You've got to go where the work is, and if you land a contract you've got to travel according to your route. This was vaudeville in 1919, and the railroads prospered mightily.

In the year 1919 the Delaware Bldg., at 36 W. Randolph St. housed the booking offices of A. Milo Bennett, Chas. Zemater, Webster Vaudeville Agency, Henry Armstrong, the American Theatrical Agency, and the Milton Schuster Office. In the Woods Theatre Bldg., at 64 W. Randolph St., a number of vaudeville booking agencies did business under the names of T. Dwight Pepple, Tom Powell Agency, Harry Rogers, Hubb & Weston, Schallman Bros., The Simon Agency, Earl & O'Brien, Will Cunningham, and the Associated Booking Offices.

Here also, in the Woods Theatre Bldg., were the Chicago offices of America's foremost music publishers; including M. Witmark & Sons; Will Rossiter; and Watterson, Berlin & Snyder. Besides offices their suites also contained many small sound-proof rooms, (in each one a piano) where vaudevillians were rehearsed and coached in the latest numbers to be plugged.

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Hundreds of “professional copies” were given out daily at these offices. “Professional copies” included the words and full orchestrations of the latest songs, and they were furnished gratis to bona fide professionals. The object, of course, was quickly to popularize each song as it came out and thus stimulate the sale of sheet music and phonograph records. There was strenuous competition among the music publishers as each used every possible means of inducing the largest number of vaudeville performers to sing or play their latest numbers. For vaudeville was recognized as the broadest medium for presenting a new song before the greatest number of people, and turning it into a hit. And so vaudeville performers of all types, in every rank and category, walked into these offices all day for their free copies. Not all of them were singers. Aerialists requested the latest waltz numbers for their incidental music while swinging on a trapeze. Perhaps Archie Onri, one of America's great jugglers, would drop in to try out a snappy number in “two-four” with which he could keep time while manipulating his famous “devil sticks.” Perhaps Jack Norworth, while starring at the Majestic Theatre, gets a wire from Ted Snyder asserting -“great new number just out, just your style. Please drop in at our Chicago office -” And so Jack Norworth (a \$2,000.00 a week star) drops in just as an ivory tickler finishes demonstrating a new number for the \$20.00 a week strip dancer of a South State Street honky-tonk.

Two notable theatrical publications also had their Chicago offices in the Woods Theatre Bldg. These were the original old New York Clipper; and The Billboard, of Cincinnati. The Billboard is still published, but the New York Clipper gave up the ghost about eighteen years ago. The Billboard was an important publication, covering the entire amusement world, from pitchmen and side-show barkers to grand opera and concert artists. Vaudeville naturally merited the greatest number of pages, with its news, reviews of new acts, and its impressive weekly route list. An especially important feature was the mail forwarding service. Thousands of show folks received their mail through the five principal Billboard offices; in Chicago, Cincinnati, New York City, San Francisco, and St. Louis. The Chicago

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offices on the fifth floor of the Woods Theatre Bldg., handled a great volume of mail, and hundreds 4 of show folks called personally each day for their letters.

An observer could stand on the northwest corner of N. Dearborn and W. Randolph Sts. any week day from 9 a. m. to 5 p. m. and watch hundreds of troupers entering and leaving the Woods Theatre Bldg., getting their mail at the Billboard office. There were big and small time vaudeville performers, animal trainers, tent show managers, chautauqua people, high pitch artists, burlesque prima donnas, carnival gyps, chorus girls, circus troupers, song pluggers, - mummers and strollers of every description. And there was little in their outward appearance to indicate which was which.

From the foregoing it must be obvious that the chronic curbstome ornaments comprised but a small fraction of the veritable army of Showdom which came daily to this corner. And the great majority of the daily sidewalk contingent consisted of small time vaudeville performers from Chicago's near North Side rooming house district. The term "small time" is here employed in a broad sense to include all acts not playing "Big time" at that particular period. Naturally many of these small timers did terrible acts. But there were some who, if given the opportunity, could step out on the stage of the Palace Theatre and stop the show. The "breaks" were often deciding factors in vaudeville.

"The Corner" was more than a mere loitering place. It was the Chicago gathering place of the vaudevillian; it was an open air club, a forum, an exchange, an information bureau,- call it what you will, it never had a definite name. But the daily assemblies had a distinct professional information which was calculated to be of mutual benefit. Questions were constantly asked, and answered. Queries such as - "Who's booking the Orpheum in Hammond now?" "How many houses does Webster book?" "What's the fare to Evansville?" "Where can a fellow have some cheap lobby photos reproduced?" 5 "Whatever became of The Six Damascos?" "What's the baggage hauling rates out to the Empress, at 63rd. and Halsted?" "Is there a good hotel in Grand Rapids that makes

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professional rates?" "Can you get back to town from Rockford after the show Sunday night?"

Suppose we edge up, quietly and unobtrusively, behind a vaudevillian who is posturing on the curbstone in front of the Woods Theatre Bldg., never forgetting the time and place. (Chicago-1919.) Another performer approaches from the direction of North Clark Street, the two vaudevillians recognize each other simultaneously, and immediately shake hands, Let's listen.

"Well! Well! If it ain't Musical Anthony. How th' heck are you, you old intermission?"

"Hello there, small timer. How's things?"

"Oh, just so-so. When did you get in town? Heard you were out on the Sun time."

"Yeah, I closed for Gus Sun at the Princess in Cleveland. I was about washed up in the east, so I thought I'd jump into Chicago."

"Leap in direct?"

"No, I wired Sam Jacobs my open time, and he broke my jump. Got me the Orpheum in Toledo, and a couple of cans up in Michigan, all one-nighters. Got in yesterday."

"Still doing your full-stage act?"

"No, I changed the routines so I can work in one. Gets me a better spot on the bill. Who's your ten-per-center in Chicago?"

"Lew Golden handles my act. Have you got an agent yet?"

"No, but I was figuring on Frank Haddon. I hear he stands in with - "

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"Nix. Lay off Haddon. He's turned crooked as hell; even expects a kick-back from a showing house. Besides, I hear he's going to lose his Western Vaudeville franchise."

A few feet away two other vaudevillians are engaged in shop talk. Their speech is also typical. A sample of their conversation is -

1st. V. - "I was just down at the Great Northern to catch the opening frolic."

2nd. V. - "I hear Tish & Torino are on the bill. How'd they go?"

1st. V. - "A panic! There's a team that'll click on any bill. Even in deuce spot, following a dumb act, they grabbed off a legitimate encore without stealing a single bow, or milking the customers for it. They've got a knockout finish that's a positive show stopper. Believe me, Tish & Torino should be dragging down the next-to-closing dough on that bill."

2nd. V. - "Who is in the feature spot?"

1st. V. - "Gus and Sadie Luken, just a small time patter act. But they've got top billing. And did they flop! Boy, it was the death of a dog. They walked off cold."

2nd V.- "The Lukens? Say, that act has died in every dump in Chicago, How did they ever land a spot on a regular bill? You know yourself that Gus was getting to be a regular Clark Street bum. Who does the business for the act?"

1st. V. - "Sadie fights the agents. I used to see her making the rounds every day. You know she's the one that holds up the act."

2nd. V. - "Oh sure, Gus would be a flop as a comic without a straight to feed him lines."

Over in front of the Delaware Bldg. two old timers stood on the curb. "Rolletti, King of the Rolling Globe" appeared rather shabby and down-at-the-heels, 7 for the old fashioned rolling globe act was already practically obsolete. And his friend - "Ventro, the Great" -

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habitually wore a small-timish air, as might be expected from a ventriloquist who was so inexperienced that his lips moved (though ever so slightly) while his dummy talked.

"I'm getting disgusted with Chicago," declared Rolletti. "these young punks they have in the booking offices nowadays don't appreciate a real artist. I was thinking of going out on The Death Trail."

"Well, it's better than working the speak-easies for floor money," was Ventro's knowing comment. "At least you're sure of eating - most of the time."

(The Death Trail, incidently, was the nickname for a horrible example of what a vaudeville circuit should not be. It comprised a string of small, cheap theatres extending from Chicago to the Northwest, down the Pacific Coast, end finishing up in Southern California where you invariably landed broke, and got back to Chicago as best you could. For full details read that famous book: "Last Days Of My Lady Vaudeville In Chicago." adv.)

"How is the coast tour now?" asked Rolletti. "You just got back from playing it. What's the dope on it.?"

"Well, as a circuit it's pretty lousy," Ventro admitted. "But it's better than starving to death here in Chicago. You open in Marysville, Kansas, and - "

"Can you get advance transportation from the office?"

"Not a chance. You've got to promote the fare to the opening date. And cut down your baggage if you want to eat regular. I left my trunks right here in Chicago and suitcased the whole circuit."

"Do you get many sleeper jumps?"

"Plenty. But you can't afford a Pullman playing five or six 8 one-nighters a week, and two or three of them cut houses. But what t'hell, an old trouper that's played the sticks with a

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mud show ought not to have any trouble folding up on the cushions, and grabbing off plenty of shut-eye in a day coach.”

“Heck no. Say, do you remember back in 1896 when we were wildcatting through Texas with the Mollie Baily Show? Remember when - ”

This being the cue for the old timers to seque into their dialogue re. “the good old days,” let's leave them to their fond memories of wagon-show days in the hectic nineties, and steal silently away. Those primitive days are gone forever; for this is Vaudeville in Chicago, in 1919.